

Safe and Supportive Schools (S3)

GRANT DESCRIPTIVE STUDY

Executive Summary

National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments



Safe Supportive Learning
Engagement | Safety | Environment

Safe and Supportive Schools (S3) Grant Descriptive Study

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Introduction

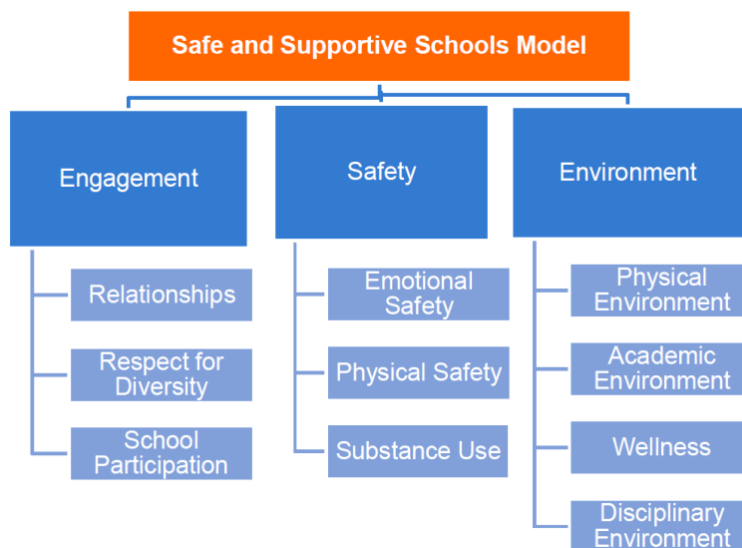
In 2010, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) awarded \$38.8 million in grants for the Safe and Supportive Schools program (S3; [CFDA Number 84.184Y](#)) to 11 State education agencies (SEAs): Arizona, California, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, South Carolina, Tennessee, West Virginia, and Wisconsin (see Exhibit 1).ⁱ These grants provided federal funds to measure school safety in 438 high schools across 193 districts at the building level and implement interventions in the schools with the greatest needs. Funded by the Office of Safe and Healthy Students,ⁱⁱ the ultimate goal of the four-year grants (school years 2010–11 through 2013–14) was to make school climate improvements that would reduce substance use and improve school safety. Improvements were achieved by addressing a broad continuum of risk and protective factors present in schools, including disruptive behaviors, interpersonal relationships, and school discipline.

Exhibit 1. Map of S3 grantee states



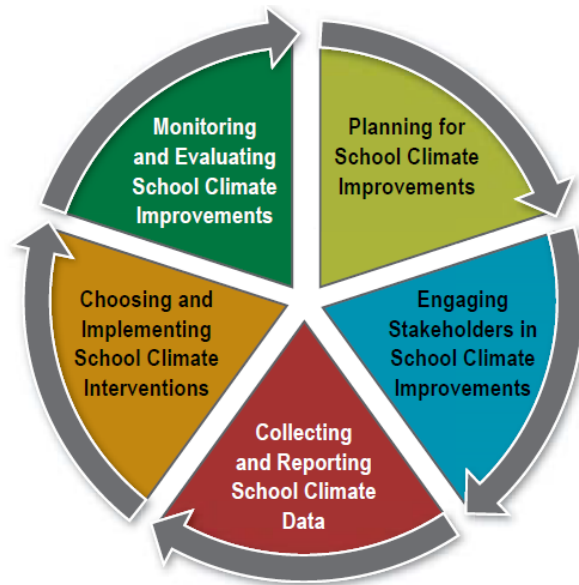
To guide their approach, the S3 grantees used a model of school climate, deemed the “S3 model,” that consisted of three broad domains, or pillars, of school experience—engagement, safety, and the environment—as well as sub-domains or topic areas within each, as shown in Exhibit 2.

Exhibit 2. Safe and Supportive Schools Model



Once efforts were underway, grantees generally engaged in five sets of activities to fulfill grant requirements: (1) planning for school climate improvements, (2) engaging stakeholders, (3) collecting and reporting school climate data, (4) choosing and implementing interventions, and (5) monitoring and evaluating school climate improvement efforts (see Exhibit 3).ⁱⁱⁱ

Exhibit 3. Five activity sets for improving school climate



This descriptive study executive summary presents findings from five years^{iv} of work conducted by grantees under the S3 grant program. The study summarizes efforts for each of the five activity sets, presenting both common and unique approaches across the grantees, highlighting successes and challenges, and detailing lessons learned.

In addition to presenting findings from the S3 grantees' work, this descriptive study aims to:

1. Support States and districts in learning how to make school climate improvements, benefitting from the experiences of others who have thoroughly engaged in this type of work.
2. Support users of the U.S. Department of Education (ED) [School Climate Surveys](#) (EDSCLS), released in March 2016, which were developed in alignment with the S3 model, with important lessons learned related to implementing school climate initiatives; and
3. Support decision-makers implementing the [Every Student Succeeds Act](#) (ESSA), signed into law on December 10, 2015. As part of this Act, educational agencies are accountable for assessing progress on at least one nonacademic indicator, such as student and educator engagement or school climate and safety. The successes and challenges of the S3 grantees have direct relevance for stakeholders currently engaged in this decision making.

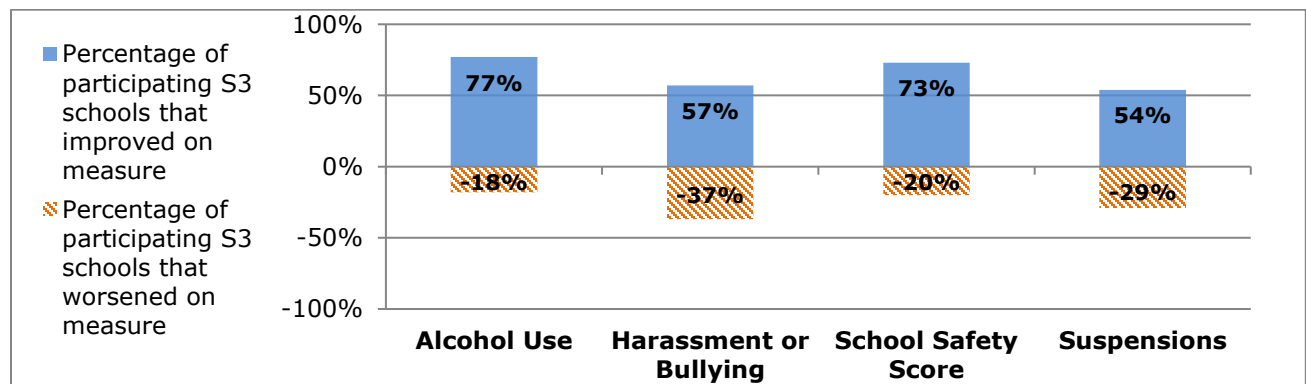
Overall Outcomes of the Safe and Supportive Schools Grant Program

S3 grantees reported annually on eight Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 (GPRA) measures. The GPRA measures reflected ***the percentage of eligible schools in their States implementing programmatic interventions funded by S3 that experienced:***

- a decrease or increase in the percentage of **students who report current (30-day) alcohol use** (GPRA measures a and b);
- a decrease or increase in the percentage of **students who report personal harassment or bullying on school property** during the current school year (GPRA measures c and d);
- improvement or worsening in their **school safety scores** (GPRA measures e and f); and
- a decrease or increase in the **number of suspensions for violent incidents without physical injury** (GPRA measures g and h).

Specifically, the GPRA measures quantified the *percentage of schools* that experienced increases/improvements or decreases/worsening for each measure, rather than whether, overall, there was a significant change in behaviors among students enrolled in the schools (see Exhibit 4).

Exhibit 4. Final S3 GPRA data – Percentage of schools improving and worsening for all S3 States, aggregated, baseline to final year



NOTE: Details do not represent 100 percent because some S3 funded schools had missing or incomplete data or did not have fully implemented interventions and were thus not included in calculations.^v

While the S3 initiative overall did not have a cross-site evaluation, each State conducted an independent evaluation. Five grantees—Arizona, Iowa, Louisiana, Maryland, and West Virginia—documented their efforts to monitor fidelity of program implementation. One evaluation (Maryland) employed a rigorous cluster randomized control design studying the impact of PBIS implementation on bullying. Two others (Wisconsin and West Virginia) performed quasi-experimental evaluations of school climate and discipline outcomes. All evaluations produced robust descriptive data. Specifically, of the 11 grantees:

- All grantees improved on at least two GPRA measures, and most improved on all four.
- Overall, no less than 54 percent and up to 77 percent of participating schools showed improvements on each of the GPRA indicators.
- There were statistically significant improvements on academic indicators in seven of the eight States that reported such data.
- Two of the three States reported statistically significant improvements in attendance.
- Two States reported statistically significant improvements in the disciplinary climate.
- Six States that compared outcomes for participating schools with demographically similar comparison schools (that did not receive interventions) reported that S3 schools outperformed comparison schools.

Although it is not entirely clear why some schools did not improve or worsened on specific GPRA measures, many faced unexpected challenges such as variance in priorities from those of the grant program, instability in school leadership and staffing, and measurement challenges including changes in requirements for reporting certain items such as school discipline and changes in parental consent regulations.

S3 Grantee-Created Resources and Tools to Support Program Implementation

Each grantee generated an array of resources to support their school climate improvement efforts. The list below showcases a selection of tools and reports the supported and documented implementation.

- Arizona: [Sustainability Checklist](#)
- California: [Climate Connection Toolkit -- Low and no-cost activities for cultivating a supportive school climate](#)
- Iowa: [Implementation Checklist](#)
- Kansas: [Gang Free Kansas Toolkit](#)
- Louisiana: [Planning for Sustainability webinar](#)
- Maryland: [Resource Binder Coaching Resources](#)
- Michigan: [“Meaningful Student Involvement”](#) summary
- South Carolina: [Annual Monitoring Tool](#)
- Tennessee: [School Climate Improvement Checklist](#)
- West Virginia: [2011](#) and [2012](#) survey research reports
- Wisconsin: [Success Stories report](#)

Details and examples of other grantee-generated products are available in individual grantee profiles.^{vi}

Key Lessons Learned by Activity Set

The individual profiles provide detailed accounts of how each of the S3 grantees approached grant activities, the challenges they faced, and overall lessons learned. The following summarizes overarching lessons learned which are critical to consider in future policy decision-making.

Planning for School Climate Improvements

- **Devote time to planning.** Upon grant award, S3 grantees were expected to start data collection immediately. However, many grantees needed more time to initiate the plans outlined in their proposals.
- **Leverage partners’ expertise and resources.** S3 grantees found that it worked well to partner with organizations (e.g., universities, consultants, nonprofits) that specialized in areas for which State-level entities or school systems did not have the skills or abilities in house.
- **Plan for sustainability early on.** Few S3 grantees thought about sustainability at the start of their grant. While many were successful in sustaining elements of their work beyond the life of the grant, earlier planning for sustainability would have increased their chances for success.

Engaging Stakeholders in School Climate Improvements

- **Facilitate “buy-in” among stakeholders by drawing the connection between school climate work and academic outcomes.** At the time the S3 grants were launched, implementing Common Core State Standards (CCSS) was a top priority nationally. Connecting academic achievement to school climate initiatives was considered key to the program’s success.
- **Build strong leadership to inspire school climate work.** According to S3 coaches and many school climate leadership teams, principals and local S3 champions contributed substantially to keeping the teams and staff motivated and progressing. A team model ensured that no single person was responsible for the climate-improvement work, and the work would continue in the face of shifting responsibilities and priorities.
- **Emphasize the importance of student voice.** Students were often the most effective advocates for school safety, especially when making presentations to school board members and community groups. They also brought to light diverse perspectives adults had often not considered.

Collecting and Reporting School Climate Data

- **Develop proactive plans to meet desired survey response rates to ensure valid data.** Grantees found that each group of survey respondents (e.g. students, parents, staff) needed individualized, coordinated outreach to ensure sufficient participation. In addition, those grantees that identified and addressed assent and consent procedures early on were then able to focus on administering the surveys.
- **Examine the quality and accessibility of administrative data during the planning stage.** Some grantees found it challenging to have enough time to acquire and assess the quality of administrative data and had to amend their plans for calculating school safety scores or reporting on student suspensions in a timely manner.
- **Collect qualitative data.** Grantees that conducted focus groups and student listening circles found that they were powerful tools for eliciting more nuanced information about school climate issues, even though they took time and resources. The process of documenting and sharing qualitative data gave grantees a more comprehensive picture of climate needs and how to help address them.
- **Tailor reports to different audiences interested in school climate work.** When reporting school climate data and activities to various stakeholders (e.g., students, teachers and school staff, families, and community members), grantees found that tailoring reports to specific audiences was an effective means of communication. They also found that it was important to determine the types of information to report at the school level versus to the district or general public.

Choosing and Implementing School Climate Interventions

- **Use data to inform intervention selection.** Although staff in some S3 schools were familiar with and liked certain interventions already in place, grantees realized that using data to guide decision making was an effective way to choose and implement interventions designed to address climate needs.
- **Implement interventions consistently and as intended by designers, within and across schools.** The time and effort that S3 grantees spent training district and school staff and supporting

professional development efforts paid off. They also found that having dedicated staff (e.g., school climate coaches) to support schools increased chances for success. In addition, continuously monitoring and supporting efforts at fidelity of implementation—ensuring that interventions are administered as intended to the appropriate students—proved to be essential to improving climate.

Monitoring and Evaluating School Climate Improvement Efforts

- **Operationalize performance measures clearly at the start of grant activities.** Grantees needed intensive technical assistance at the beginning of the grant program to fully understand how to measure and calculate their survey and incident data so they could accurately report on the eight GPRA performance indicators.
- **Focus on continuous improvement for long term success.** Those schools that thoughtfully observed their progress, adjusted their course regularly in response to data results, and willingly learned from challenges and tried new strategies enjoyed more improved climate than schools that did not take these steps.
- **Strive for high levels of fidelity of implementation to achieve better outcomes.** Grantees reported anecdotally that schools that implemented their interventions consistently and remained true to the guidelines or protocols for their programs effected more positive school climate changes.

Key Recommendations to Inform Federal Policies Regarding School Climate Programming and Measurement

The findings of the Safe and Supportive Schools Descriptive Study inform the following four recommendations for consideration for future school climate programs at the federal level.

- 1) **Continue federal investments in school climate measurement and programming.** Grantees reported significant positive improvements in school climate as a result of the S3 program. Additional analyses suggested that improvements in school climate were also associated with other outcomes that matter, including academic achievement, attendance, and school discipline. Many activities funded by initial Federal investments (e.g. professional development, climate surveys, school level action planning) are being sustained by grantees using state and local resources. Grantees reported that “this kind of work cannot be undone” – the positive results spoke for themselves, and the priorities set around school climate are now part of their school systems’ organizational culture.
- 2) **Consider the opportunities and limitations that school climate data may offer in support of accountability efforts.** There may be numerous strategies to use school climate data to strengthen state- and district-level monitoring of (and public awareness of) the safety of individual schools. However, further investigation is needed to understand the drawbacks and benefits of different approaches, and how each may contribute to or inhibit broad efforts to improve school safety. The S3 program provided some insights into one approach – the creation and public reporting of school-level, composite safety scores. As the grantees used different formulas to calculate composite scores, it is difficult to: 1) generalize about the contribution of composite scores to grantee’s efforts, or 2) determine whether certain formulas yielded composites that were more useful in supporting state efforts to improve school climates. It is important to note, however, that all grantees experienced

challenges in reporting the composite scores due to sensitivity about transparency (i.e., the risk of some schools being perceived as “bad” due to low scores).

- 3) **Target school climate grant funding to states to coordinate and support the success of LEAs.** For all 11 grantees, the state served a critical supportive role that greatly contributed to the overall success of participating LEAs. State level teams succeeded in enlisting districts to participate. Further, grant staff set the agenda and were able to provide a level of support to districts – through coaching, training, conferences, and financing– that was key to improvements in school climate. For example, state funded coaches were critical to providing data-informed, customized professional development to districts, as well as supporting program implementation fidelity. Because states championed the effort, they also now have common data representing at least 20% of the state’s total student enrollment (a requirement of the grant).
- 4) **Fund cross-grantee, ongoing support for implementers.** Nationwide technical assistance to the 11 grantee states provided a model and a down-flow of information and resources for them to use to support participating LEAs and schools. Among those supports, grantees found that communities of practice (CoPs) were particularly helpful, allowing a venue for state directors, coaches, and evaluators to communicate and share successes, strategies, and learning. A tiered technical assistance approach worked well – with universal supports provided to all grantees on core school climate improvement activities, and targeted approaches for grantees with unique issues. TA specialists at the national level and coaches at the state and local level helped translate best practices to support successful implementation.

Closing

The success of the Safe and Supportive Schools grant program highlights the importance of investment in school climate. Conditions for learning are both dynamic and malleable, and have the potential to influence student outcomes. Positive school climates—environments in which students feel safe, supported, challenged, and accepted—help teachers teach and students learn, increasing the odds that children can achieve their full potential.

ⁱ Grant awards ranged from \$1.6 million to \$6 million for each of the 11 states. For more information, see <http://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-education-awards-388-million-safe-and-supportive-school-grants>.

ⁱⁱ In 2010, this office was called the Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools (OSDFS).

ⁱⁱⁱ More information about conducting school climate improvement work and details on these activity sets can be found at <https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/scirp/about>.

^{iv} The original grant period was four years; however, all 11 grantees exercised a fifth and final no-cost extension year to complete data collection and analyses. Wisconsin extended nine months (through June 2015) and the others extended 12 months (through September 2015).

^v Guidance to S3 grantees from Office of Safe and Healthy Students in September 2012 provided an operational definition of schools “implementing programmatic interventions” as those whose programs are “fully implemented.” More specifically, a school was considered as “fully implemented” if most programs in the school were fully implemented as planned, and the remainder of programs were close to being implemented and/or would be finished by the end of the school year. Further, states were directed to use the definition of “programmatic interventions” as given on p. 26 of the S3 grantees’ RFA.

^{vi} Individual grantee profiles can be accessed at <https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/stategrantee-profile>.